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## SEMANTIC STUDIES IN LATIN

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By semantics is meant the systematic and methodical study of the meanings of words and the changes they undergo. Up to the present time the study can hardly be said to be systematic, because its recognition as a distinct branch of linguistics has not been gained, nor has instruction been offered in the subject, and only now and then have scholars devoted their attention to the pursuit of it except so far as etymological studies called for its support. We prefer the word "methodical" to "scientific" because in language study, where one must deal with all the wilfulness of human thought and speech and not merely with phonetic laws or other so-called laws, scientific analogies have been extremely misleading. Between science and art lies a chasm, and literature is art and not science. Literature is a human record of human doings with a background of inherited, continuous, racial thought distinct from the personality of the individual author. It is this background, this subconscious, accumulated experience of the race lying behind the contemporary idiom and involuntarily shared by the individual, that the semanticist strives to recover and bit by bit to reveal. In other words, it is the reaction of the common mind to linguistic environment, if we may so speak, as opposed to the reaction of the individual mind, which was exhaustively studied ages ago and is denominated "style," that constitutes the subject-matter of semantics.

Behind the words of a language lie habits of thinking, little ways of looking at things, which may be quite foreign to our minds and easily escape untrained or casual observation. Take such a common word as *industrius*, older *industruus*, which continues to puzzle scholars, although we know it to come from *indu*, an older form of *in*, and *struo*. It is a good word to begin with because it can be quite definitely explained and will serve to introduce us to

one of the leading principles of semantic study in the Latin language, namely, that this language was made for the most part on the farm, and in the sphere of agricultural life the solution of obscure words must very often be sought. In a quest of this kind an author like Cicero is of little assistance, since he employed the urban dialect and his mind was singularly obtuse to the perception of the earlier implications of words and the thought behind them. It is necessary to turn to a rustic like Cato, whose career was ended before the dialect of the town took shape, or to a poet like Virgil, who had a singular gift for seizing the picturesque and suggestive phrases out of the older authors and an equal gift for living over in his imagination the simple rural life of the days that were no more. Now both he and Cato lay particular stress upon the necessity of supplying one's self beforehand with such things as plows, wagons, yokes, harness, wine and oil jars, and all the apparatus that went with mixed farming as it then existed. These implements constituted the *instrumentum*, and so we see, taking the two words together, that the *vir industrius* was the active and foresighted man who provided himself with each thing that he needed before the day of need arrived. Therefore *industria* was only the modern virtue of "preparedness" and the *vir industrius* what we call the "forehanded man."

A parallel word to *industrius* is *imperator*, older *induperator*, though here we shift to the military sphere. That this is compounded of *in* and *parare* is quite manifest, but how *imperator*, "provider," came to mean commander and *imperium* came to mean "the supreme command" is by no means self-evident. Here we must observe a second principle of semantic study in Latin, that the function of an official not infrequently changed, while the term of denotation remained the same. As an illustration we may mention the *quaestor*, from *quaerere*, who was in the beginning appointed to "investigate" crimes and in the course of time became the custodian of public moneys. Now the *imperator*, according to our principle, must originally have been precisely what the name declares, the official who was responsible for "getting in" supplies for the army. This was done in Caesar's time, as we know from the Gallic Wars, almost exclusively by purchase, *comparare*,

but in earlier days by requisition, *imperare*, which brings to notice two other principles of semantic study in Latin: first, that the Romans, like the Greeks, were prone to maintain customs and forget their origins; and secondly, that religious colorings were regularly given to institutions that had their origin in policy or justice. For example, when the army was being outfitted and fed it was only fair that the city should be exempt from the requisition, since all the leading people had estates outside of the limits, where their surplus stores of hay, grain, meat, wine, and oil would be found. Therefore it was decreed that the *imperium*, or right to commandeer, should have no force within the *pomerium*, or religious boundaries, of the city, that is, the consular auspices must be taken outside. Hence we may perceive that the persistent reluctance to extend the boundaries, though backed by religious scruples, must long have been instigated by class interests and aristocratic selfishness, which will be better realized if we recall that even the Campus Martius and the adjacent land across the Tiber were cultivated down to historical times by members of the patrician families. We can also understand for what reason the title of *imperator* became a term of praise on the lips of the legionary, since his welfare, and especially the needs of his stomach, depended upon the efficiency and courage of the *imperator*, or "provider."

Reverting to the principle that functions change and terms of denotation remain, we may consider the words *praetor* and *explorator*. The latter is manifestly from *plorare*, "cry aloud," but the scout will do anything rather than "cry aloud." Thrown off the scent by this contradiction of terms a multilingual European philologist seeks another root and finds something conceivably similar in Armenian and Old Irish, as one may learn in Walde's *Etymological Latin Dictionary*, a terribly learned book with woeful lapses on the semantic side. Far better is it to confine one's self somewhat obstinately to one language, going abroad with caution and as a last resort. In the case of *explorator* it is likely that we have only the "loud-voiced herald" or "crier" of kingly times. An instance of his purely heraldic function is to be found in a note of Servius to Aeneid (vii. 168): "Nam legati siquando incogniti nuntiarentur, primo quid vellent *ab exploratoribus* requirebatur, post ad eos

egrediebantur magistratus minores." This makes plain to us that his primitive functions lay partly at least in the formalities of communication between governments, and it is likely that he was required to demand of all invaders the nature of their intentions before hostilities began. It is thus easy to imagine how he became a spy instead of a crier or herald.

With *praetor* we are introduced to another phenomenon of much consequence to semanticists, which we may call "polysemasia." By this we mean that a single word may possess more than one meaning, and it is of great importance to determine with which signification the derivative is to be associated. For instance, Varro asserts that the *praetor* was so named because he "went ahead" of the army, but Varro is a hasty etymologist and rarely has second thoughts. It will pay us to make sure that another meaning will not prove a better fit. In the lexicon one finds that *praeire*, abbreviated from *praeire verbis*, is at once frequent and technical in the sense of "dictating an oath," in the manner of the preacher who in the marriage ceremony "precedes with the words" which the contracting couple must repeat after him. It is common knowledge, of course, that the Roman soldiers, except in cases of extreme emergency, were required individually to repeat the *sacramentum* in the presence of the commander, who was originally the *praetor*, *prae-itor*, or "swearer." Admitting this, we can readily understand how this official became a judge in the course of time, with power to swear in jurors, examine witnesses, and in short to preside wherever declarations were to be made on oath. It may be mentioned by the way that the term "dictator" is no doubt a translation of *praetor*, the dictator being the *praetor* or "swearer" *par excellence* and empowered to "swear in" any man for public service. It may be mentioned also that in the schoolroom *dictare* is used of the teacher who dictates a sentence for the scholars to repeat after him, although the usual word is *praecipere*.

To illustrate further the nature of semantic studies from the military sphere we may discuss *provincia* and *exercitus*. The latter is manifestly from *ex* and *arcere*, but it is far from manifest why *exercitus* should mean "army" and *exercere* "exercise." We shall

not dogmatize, but we venture to suggest that Varro gives us a clue when he uses *exercitus* as equivalent to *Comitia Centuriata*, which we know was "excluded" from the city (*De lingua Latina* vi. 9. 88). Thus *exercitus* denoted the whole body of men qualified by age and training to attend the military assembly, who in that capacity were "excluded" from the city, and so "to be excluded" signified "to be drilled." How large a place this institution occupied in the Roman mind is proved by the fact that *exercere* was entirely deflected to the meaning "drill," "exercise," while *arcere* continued to mean "exclude."

In the case of *provincia* also a striking shift of meaning has occurred. Walde affords us no assistance, since the multilingual philologist whom he quotes offers only dubious affinities from Gothic and Old High German, while to explain the term adequately one need not go beyond the Latin, or Greek at the farthest. It is manifestly compounded of *pro* and *\*vicia*, Greek *foukia*, of the same root as *vīcus*, with *n* intruded from *vincere*, and signifies the "outlying settlements" or "frontiers." It signified all parts of Roman territory at a distance from the capital, and it is curious that English actors still use it in precisely this sense, speaking of parts outside of London as "the provinces." Moreover it is likely that the district of Provence in Southern France was first so called in this non-technical way. The technical history of the term begins when the senate assigned a certain part of "the frontier" to a consul as his sphere of action and authority.

The foregoing examples, taken chiefly from the military sphere, will serve to illustrate the methods of semantic studies and their relationship to accepted etymologies, to which they furnish a valuable test and check. It will be noted that the philologist, with the gift of tongues, is tempted to go far afield with slight excuse, while the semanticist, with his chief interest in the literature, strives harder to explain the term within the language; and while the former lays heavy stress upon the scientific aspects of language study, especially in respect to phonetic laws, the latter insists that just as distinct a field of inquiry, demanding taste, judgment, and acute observation, exists in the sphere of meanings, although the end in view is less scientific than literary.

The study possesses many attractions: it is such that any studious person may engage in it; the material is available on every page; it may be pursued in any language and in English and Latin at the same time; it holds out the pleasure of discovery; it throws a gleam of light on many a dark spot in history, and in literature it constitutes an instrument of interpretation and a method of attack; and it stimulates the observation, no matter whether one tries it for himself or merely follows the work of others. Only, one must be prepared to stand upon his own feet and not look upon the dictionary as a Bible. This study will upset many a trusted notion.